

Knapsack and Haversack Packing 101

[Editors' note: Kevin O'Beirne's methodology for improving the portrayal of soldiers on campaign approaches the "Vigilant Soldier" philosophy. It is presented here with numerous Editors' remarks as the "Soldier" is still in development.]

"Bring for your men shelter-tents....and drop all excess of baggage." Major General John McClelland, Thirteenth Army Corps, April 21, 1864 (Red River Campaign).

"...considering...the fact that three days' [rations] has heretofore been the maximum amount [carried], the board recommends as follows: 1. That all extra clothing, except a change of underclothing, be stored. 2. That five days' rations of bread and small-stores be placed in the knapsack. 3. Three days' cooked rations in the haversack, and five days' fresh beef upon the hoof. 4. Two mules per regiment to carry camp-kettles, rice, beans, &c. Each soldier will carry—Haversack 5½ lbs., Knapsack 6 lbs., Blanket 5¼ lbs., Clothing 2 lbs., Total, 19 lbs. Making 13¼ pounds in the knapsacks, being 2¼ pounds less than the weight usually carried by soldiers in this army in their knapsacks." Report of Board of Officers Convened per Army of the Potomac General Orders No. 65, March 7, 1863 (prior to the Chancellorsville campaign).

"The troops carried through the campaign only those things most necessary for their constant use...A blanket should have been taken, but no overcoat. Both weigh a man down too heavily, and are not necessary in moderate weather." Brigadier General Rufus Ingalls, Chief Quartermaster, Army of the Potomac, May 29, 1863.

The average reenactor qualifies as a "heavy camper", and one of the easiest, most satisfying and least-expensive ways to improve your impression is to lighten your load. Reenact with less. While it includes packing of eight days' rations — more than any reenactor would ever carry — it is interesting to note that the recommendations of the Board of Officers in response to General Orders No. 65 (see above) was adopted by the Army of the Potomac for the Chancellorsville campaign. Reenactors should consider the fine example set by the Federal soldiers of 1863 the next time they pack their gear for a two-day reenactment.

The first resolution to make in lightening your reenactor's load is to use no more than what you can comfortably carry in a single trip, and never bring your car into an encampment site. If the Army of the Potomac could go eight days without issuing rations from wagon trains, then surely a hearty and hale living historian can survive a two-day reenactment without having to use a motor vehicle for anything other than transportation to the event's participant parking lot. Once you arrive at the parking lot, don your traps and knapsack, shoulder your musket and march into camp. Not only will you be more accurate, but you will also avoid the hazards and traffic problems associated with bringing your vehicle into and out of a campsite.

The second (and final) resolution is to pack so that your knapsack and haversack contain only the essentials, and only items that a soldier of 1861-1865 would have had on campaign. Remember, your pack should be light enough for you to comfortably wear it into

each battle scenario during a weekend-long event. If the pack is too heavy to wear to all the battles, then start lightening the load by casting off the non-essentials.

Below is a packing checklist that I use in preparation for living history events. Your "essentials" may vary.

Knapsack [1]

One Blanket: One good five pound, 100 percent wool blanket is all any reenactor needs, even in cold weather. Make sure the blanket is good-sized; my blanket is fifty-seven inches by eighty inches and was obtained from the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Store. [DOG: Since the "Auggie Wiessert" blanket is no longer produced, we suggest the "Abraham Thomas" Federal issue blanket from Quartermaster Woolens. It is a fine piece of work, ARF! See the Abraham Thomas US issue blanket review on page 12. We also understand (and have seen the original) that the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Store is going to be selling a Confederate blanket. As of this issue we have no further information on it.]

One Gum Blanket: Essential for use as a ground cloth, raincoat, or shelter. Excellent, large (forty-six inch by seventy inch) gum blankets with properly-sized grommets can be obtained from C&D Jarnagin. [DOG: Often soldiers were offered an option: rubber blanket or shelter half?]

One Shelter Tent Half: Decent shelter halves can be obtained vendors such as Haversack Depot, Artifakes, Heywood and a selected, few others [2]. A proper shelter half should weigh only 1.5 pounds, compared to an actual weight of 4.0 pounds for a Panther Lodge shelter half or similar type constructed from heavier than specified canvas. A shelter half is essential for protection from the elements. Individual soldiers should *not* carry full tents (i.e. two shelter halves). Evidence that triangular end-pieces for dog tents were ever available to the average Billy Yank is exceedingly scant. [DOG: Shelter tents were not as essential as we think. Based letters, diaries and QM reports neither were they present on campaign as often as reenactors might prefer]

A Journal Book and Pencils: A non-essential personal item which comes in handy for a soldier on campaign to record his thoughts, write letters home, use as a fire-starter, or to use as "paper" in "an emergency".

Extra Pair(s) of Wool [or cotton] Socks: Perhaps the real soldiers did not always have extra socks, but it is recommended that all reenactors carry a second pair for warmth at night and for health-purposes. Further, one extra pair of socks is a small, light addition to your pack. [DOG: Usually soldiers were initially issued two pairs of socks, two pairs of drawers and if a US soldier, two government-pattern issue shirts. Having these extras depends on the time and place.]

Extra Drawers: A non-essential item that was not available to most soldiers on campaign. [DOG: Drawers were issued and an extra pair doesn't weight much. The issue we see is trying to get most reenactors to wear period drawers in the first place!]

Extra Shirt: Completely non-essential in the warmer months, an extra shirt is a necessity for colder-weather reenacting. [DOG: Our experience is that even in the summer a clean and dry shirt on Saturday evening is quite refreshing, and it's very authentic to wash

the other one and have it drying for use the next day...this goes for stockings too. Alas, the poor soldier on campaign probably only had one shirt.]

A Vest: Non-essential, and used mainly for colder-weather reenacting. The idea that every soldier in the field had a vest is a "reenactor myth", so take your choice on whether you want to carry one.

A Greatcoat: Leave the greatcoat home in warm weather (soldiers placed them in storage from late spring until autumn). However, a Federal-issue overcoat for reenacting in the colder months is one of the most useful items in the living historian's kit. It serves as both a coat and a blanket, and at night the cape can be used to completely cover your face and head for warmth.

Small Towel(s): Not of the modern day terrycloth variety...a period-correct towel, such as "Huckabuck" towels sold at Wal-Mart, or the excellent NPS reproductions, is useful in washing up your person and/or your gear. Carry a bar of lye soap (or, better yet, part of a bar) with the towel. [DOG: Soap was issued along with candles, but not always while on the campaign. Don't forget the weight of the soap in your calculations]

Extra Ammunition: Pack ammunition correctly in paper packages of ten rounds plus one paper tube with twelve percussion caps. This approach is accurate and takes up the least space in your knapsack.

Roll of Twine (String): About twenty to thirty feet of twine or hemp is the campaigner's essential companion for rigging up shelter. Make sure the twine has no modern fibers. [DOG: That much twine, or cording, might be for a whole company. A few feet of it for tying a blanket role, securing a rubber blanket, or replacing a shoe lace ought to be enough.]

Extra Food: Food for a two- or three-day reenactment should fit in the haversack but, in the event you pack heavy, or are bringing more than three days of food, put the extra into the knapsack.

Haversack Articles: Minimize your haversack items, and to increase room in the haversack (which is primarily for rations), place some of your articles into the knapsack. Articles a soldier might well have carried include a tintype of his family, a bible, shaving gear, sewing kit, a few pieces of dry kindling, pipe and tobacco, and other personal items. Evaluate all your items and determine if they are "essential" for a soldier on campaign. Chances are, after some soul-searching, you will decide that most of them — especially "necessary" flasks — are useless trash that take up important room in your pack. [DOG: many soldiers stuffed personal items in their trowser or coat pockets.]

Haversack

Rations: Limiting campaign-rations primarily to salt pork or beef, hardtack, coffee and sugar not only makes one more authentic, but these items take up less room and weigh less than the rations consumed by most reenactors. Forget about canned food! You can also lubricate your weapon with the pork fat (it will not rust the metal). [DOG: The army rarely issued full rations by weight when on active campaign. There were sporadic issue, incomplete issues and time when there was no issue at all. Don't forget that a soldier might have also had other issued or purchased such as vegetables prior to going on the march.]

Tin Plate: A good tin plate is essential as a serving dish, frying pan and, if necessary, digging implement (for fire pits or earthworks). Assuming it fits inside, a plate adds rigidity to your haversack. A canteen half will serve the same purpose.

Eating Utensils: A knife, fork, and spoon are essential, and living historians may want to consider wrapping them in a rag or in a small canvas sack. Also, a pocketknife in your pants pocket or

haversack is essential.

Tin Can: A period-correct tin can with a wire bail attached is excellent for use as a coffee boiler and as supplemental mess furniture.

Candle: One beeswax candle is useful. A candle holder is not required; just turn a tin cup upside down.

Matches and Matchsafe: It is a good idea for each reenactor to carry one box of matches in a matchsafe (i.e. a small box that protects the box of matches from being crushed). Matches can also be carried in a jacket pocket. Reproduction matchsafes are generally not very correct but, with some careful shopping at an antique store or relic vendor, one can find a fairly inexpensive period matchsafe.

Handkerchiefs: Carry one or two period-correct handkerchiefs (not the modern blue or red bandannas sold by the "sutlers").

Hygiene Items: The writer carries a muslin poke bag with a wooden toothbrush, comb, and two small glass vials with corks (one vial contains baking soda for tooth powder, and the other is for sunscreen). As personal preference, the writer carries these in the haversack instead of the knapsack, in a location where pork grease will not contaminate the toothbrush. [DOG: Toothpowder containers were generally made of wood or porcelain. Why not take a cue from patent toilet and writing kits of the period, and roll up one's modest toilet articles in one of the towels or handkerchiefs, tie it with a piece of cord or shoe lace? By putting this in the knapsack the nasty salt pork could be avoided.]

During the preparation of this article, the writer packed his knapsack and haversack as recommended above and then weighed each. The haversack contained two day's rations of salt pork, hardtack, and coffee (total weight of rations per Army Regulations: 3.7 pounds), along with a few haversack items and mess gear, including a tin dipper attached to the outside of the haversack. The total weight of the haversack was 5.7 pounds. The knapsack was packed with a blanket, gum blanket, authentic shelter half, greatcoat, towel, socks, extra drawers, forty blank cartridges, journal book and pencils, and a few miscellaneous articles. The weight of the full knapsack was 17.5 pounds; when the greatcoat was removed, the weight of the knapsack was 14.0 pounds. [DOG: Forty ball rounds plus tins weigh four pounds. The greatcoat should not be included when comparing it to total weight for late-April to early-September campaigning. The soldiers on campaign during this period in 1863 would not have had space for some of the articles listed here because the space was occupied by extra rations.]

How does the recommended reenactor's packing list stack up against the Army of the Potomac's marching load at the beginning of the Chancellorsville campaign? Answer: fairly well. The reproduction items weighed included only two days' rations, plus a gum blanket and the weight of the haversack and knapsack proper. The Board of Officers' recommendations included three days' full rations in the haversack; in the knapsack were five days' rations of hardtack, two pounds of clothing (roughly equivalent to a pair of socks and a shelter half), and a blanket. Note that the Board of Officers' recommended load does not include the weight of a gum blanket, which was carried by all soldiers of the Army of the Potomac during the Chancellorsville campaign, or the weight of the haversack and knapsack themselves. (For copious quartermasters' reports on how the Board of Officers' recommendations fared on campaign, see the *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Volume 25, Part 2, pages 544-559). [3] The Board's recommended load includes about 7.9 pounds of food not in the reenactor's haversack and knapsack, while the weight of the reenactor's gum blanket, haversack, and knapsack totaled about 7.5

pounds. The reenactor's journal book, forty blank cartridges, and other nick-knacks more than account for the difference of 0.4 pounds. Therefore, it can be concluded that the packing list recommended in this article is fairly authentic. Further, I assert, based on personal experience, that it is sufficient for protection from the elements and includes enough food for a two-day reenactment. Note that the list does not include a whiskey flask, lantern, ammunition box, tent poles, camp stools, multiple blankets, canned food, railroad spikes for tent stakes, or other useless items that do nothing but add bulk and weight to your campaign kit and detract from your authenticity. Try reenacting with the packing list included in this article, and you'll be surprised at how easy it is how comfortable you'll be, and how authentic you'll feel. [DOG: The next logical step is to make your packing completely accurate by closely observing the type and amount of items for *specific* campaign impression scenarios.]

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NOTES:

The topic of what an infantry man should carry as determined by US Army officers in 1863 is also being explored in a three-part series in *The Long Roll*, the newsletter of the Army of the Pacific. The first two parts have been published. Reprints may be available at a small charge from Dom Dal Bello at PO Box 1863, Goleta, CA 93116, especially if you ask politely.

- [1] Next year the DOG would like to do a review of knapsacks similar to our bootee series. We encourage suppliers to submit samples and solicit field reports on those on the market from our readers.
- [2] The DOG's favorite shelter tent sources:

The Haversack Depot (Phil Cavanaugh)
PO Box 311262, New Braunfels, TX 78131 and (830) 620-5192

Artifakes (Don Rademacher)
1608 W. Pearl St., Stevens Point, WI 54481 and (715) 341-5893

Heywood Shelters (Dan Cheatum)
616 Bakersfield Rd., Carbondale, IL 62901 and (618) 529-3038

The Arsenal (Eric Hector) [see product review below]
PO Box 5103, W. Lebanon, NH 03784 and (603) 448-9854

- [3] *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, Series I: Burnside's Order: Vol. XXIII (Book No. 35); Chancellorsville: Vol. XXV, Parts 1 & 2 (Book No. 39 & 40); Ingalls' fiscal year report: Vol. XXIX, Part I (Book No. 48) and Vol. XXXVI, Part 1 (Book No. 67)*

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